

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
Preparing for the Digital Television Transition: Will Seniors Be Left in the Dark?
September 19, 2007

Good morning, I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them for their participation. We are here today to bring attention to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of seniors as the nation transitions from free over-the-air analog TV to digital TV. Commonly referred to as the DTV transition, broadcasters will stop airing their signals in analog after February 17, 2009. Without proper preparation, millions of America's seniors may turn on their TVs on February 18, 2009 only to find themselves left in the dark without access to critical weather updates, emergency alerts, news or entertainment programming.

Some claim that the transition will be the most significant advancement in technology since the dawn of color TV. There will be many associated benefits. Most importantly the transition will improve the lines of communication between our nation's first responders during emergencies. However, my committee's investigation has left me deeply concerned about how the DTV transition will be implemented. As one of the witnesses will tell us today, we need an investment in consumer education akin to the multi-million dollar awareness campaign for Medicare Part D. However, as another witness will point out we must learn from the disastrous implementation of Medicare Part D which left millions of seniors confused and scrambling to the already overextended and under resourced members of the aging network.

The fact is – Congress mandated this transition. What Congress did not do is clearly determine who should oversee and take responsibility for the transition. Today we will hear from GAO that there is little coordination between the government agencies that have jurisdiction over different aspects of the transition. Nor did Congress provide adequate funding for a widespread awareness campaign about the transition. As of now, only \$5 million dollars has been set aside to educate 300 million Americans about the impending transition over the next 17 months. Compare this to the \$400 million being spent over five years in Great Britain to educate only 60 million citizens about their own digital transition.

Millions of American families may be impacted by this change—there are roughly 20 million households that rely exclusively on free over-the-air programming. Seniors are particularly vulnerable to slipping through the cracks of the transition. Not only are they more likely to rely on free over-the-air analog TV signals, as shown in a study by the Association of Public Television Stations, but for many seniors television is their only link to the outside world. Several of today's witnesses will tell us that seniors need targeted outreach – and I agree. This committee's investigation has revealed that, in spite of this need, little is being done to address the unique needs of seniors and provide entities in the aging network with the resources they need to ensure a successful transition.

I am also deeply concerned with how seniors, and Americans in general, will be able to find, install, and afford necessary converter boxes to allow their analog television sets to continue to work. The current program to provide coupons to offset the cost of these

converter boxes is fraught with confusion and vulnerable to fraud and abuse. Seniors may not realize that the coupon will not pay for the entire cost of the converter box and be stuck with bills they did not expect and cannot afford. I am also worried that retailers may try to sell seniors more expensive TVs or converters than they need. One of today's witnesses will be detailing such misleading sales tactics that are already occurring in electronics stores around the D.C. area.

This week I will be introducing critical legislation with Senator Olympia Snowe to help address many of these concerns. The bill will establish and fund a public-private partnership between the government, senior organizations, and industry stakeholders. This partnership would launch a consumer education campaign to ensure that older individuals who depend on analog TV are not left without service after the transition. To increase awareness, our bill would require commercial broadcasters to air public service announcements. The bill would require easily identifiable labels on coupon-eligible converter boxes so that seniors know what they are buying. It also would establish a toll-free number to provide assistance on how to install the converter boxes. These are common sense changes and I hope my colleagues will support them.

If properly planned for and implemented, the DTV transition could be seamless. Without adequate planning and coordination, seniors will be left in the dark.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and we will continue to work with each of you to identify and address the shortfalls of the DTV Transition.